MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING: THE CHALLENGE OF DIRECTING SHAKESPEARE'S ROMANTIC COMEDY FOR A CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers the written component of Liza Balkan's investigation into her thesis project: editing and directing the 2019 production of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing,* produced as part of the 37th season for the Canadian Stage Company's Shakespeare in High Park. The inquiry within these pages involves the challenges of directing this "merry war" of a classical, romantic comedy (written in 1598/99) for the High Park audience of 2019. How do hearts and minds living in an era of #MeToo take on its themes of love, war, patriarchy, wit, shaming, deception, failure, comedy, and gender politics written from the male perspective of the 16th century? The goal of creating a vibrant, relevant production that embraces and includes the modern audience in its storytelling and dramaturgy inspired the rigorous line of inquiry and propelled the vision for this production.

DEDICATION

To my sister Donna Lee Balkan whose love of theatre was matched only by her brilliant mind and extraordinary love of life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING:
THE CHALLENGE OF DIRECTING SHAKESPEARE'S ROMANTIC COMEDY FOR A CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE

INTRODUCTION

Produced for Canadian Stage's annual Shakespeare in High Park, my graduate thesis project, *Much Ado About Nothing* by William Shakespeare, examines the ways in which this romantic comedy from the late 16th century might prove relevant and compelling for an audience living in the precarious and evolving dialectic of the early 21st century.

"If love is a battlefield, rom-coms are war stories," writes Claire Fallon in the *Huffington Post* in 2018. Fallon's words live right in the pocket of Shakespeare's play about amoré and its armour. Written in 1598 or 1599, the dance of love and war is present in every moment on every page. Always a fascinatingly complicated two-step, I would suggest that in the present era of #MeToo, the complexity of its choreography has increased exponentially. The terrain on which we are now choosing how to participate in this dance—or not—is jagged and continues to shift. Envisioning and directing a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* for the High Park audience in 2019 is a challenge that demands I traverse Shakespeare's terrain through the lens of my own personal and artistic aesthetic and practice.

It also ushers me toward an examination of comedy, and its necessity in our lives and in our art as we face challenges centuries old and as new as yesterday's news. Dr. Stephanie Sarkis, in her 2011 blog for *Psychology Today*, offers dozens of quotes about the nature and importance of comedy. Four of them remain my guideposts as I contemplate the work ahead on *Much Ado About Nothing*:

1. "Comedy is about acting out optimism." - Robin Williams

2. "Like a welcome summer rain, humor may suddenly cleanse and cool the earth, the air

and you." - Langston Hughes

3. "Laugh as much as possible, always laugh. It's the sweetest thing one can do for oneself and one's fellow human beings." - Maya Angelou

4. "If you're laughing, I defy you to be afraid." - Stephen Colbert

Playwright Sarah Ruhl, in her book *100 Essays I Don't Have Time To Write*, says:

> Still, people sometimes dismiss comedies precisely because of laughter. The laughter was cheap, they say, or the wrong quality…If plays have their roots in vaudeville as much as they have their roots in Passion plays then their roots are cut off when laughter is viewed as cheap" (138).

Ruhl also offers that "Perhaps serious-minded people dismiss comedies because they are not thought to be as morally instructive as tragedies" (138). As I approach the prospect of directing *Much Ado About Nothing,* I fear that I've found myself veering toward that misguided sentiment, momentarily forgetting the power of comedy and its ability to help us come together to manage our vulnerability, shame and humanity.

The following investigation for this thesis includes information about the particular venue for this production and the effect it has on my directorial choices, the play's story and its themes, the origins of the text, insights from past productions of the play (including those productions directed by women), my envisioning of the play's setting and locale for this upcoming production, and examinations of specific choices involving key characters in the play and how these decisions will inform the storytelling on stage. I also touch upon recent practical research involving essential conversations on issues of equity, diversity and inclusion when contemplating directing Shakespeare for today's audience in High Park.

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH PAPER

HIGH PARK AND THE AUDIENCE

Running from July 4th - September 1st, 2019, Shakespeare in High Park is a summer theatrical tradition in Toronto, marking its 37th year. The Canadian Stage website notes that it is Canada's largest and longest-running professional outdoor theatrical event. Ticket prices are low: either pay-what-you-can upon entering the venue or a modest twenty-five dollars if bought prior to arriving at the site. It attracts one of the most diverse audiences in Toronto. People of all ages, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds attend the hillside amphitheatre all summer long. "Sharing" is the operative word. The outdoor venue offers an informality that has the ability to create and embrace a communal experience for the audience and actors alike. Walking through High Park, sitting in the open air, having a picnic and then sharing an evening in Shakespeare's world, continues to be a much beloved event. This shared experience includes its programming of two separate productions: *Measure for Measure* and *Much Ado About Nothing* this summer, to be performed at the venue on alternate days.

In *Theatre of the Unimpressed,* Jordan Tannahill offers a question posited by arts curator and Belgian festival director, Frie Leysen, that is my constant guide. She asks, "How can we make the audience a partner in the adventure instead of a consumer?" (qtd. in Tannahill 77). Exactly! This desire for a sense of "partnership in the adventure" has guided my work over the past several years and will inform the production of *Much Ado*.

The audience as partner can be manifested in myriad ways for this production. On the most basic level, everyone—audience and actors alike—is sharing the hill. This is theatre as a community event: people arrive early, spread out blankets, picnic, chat, and share insect repellent as they wait for the show to begin. I propose that before the show the actor playing Beatrice will

wander on the hill, interacting and chatting with the audience. Her task will be to garner ideas and phrases from the audience that may well become part of her own stand-up routine at the top of the show and be woven in at various points throughout its journey. This will enable the audience and actor to connect immediately. The actor playing Dogberry (a park ranger in this production) will also be on the hill prior to the show, conversing with the audience. The reasons for this direction are two-fold: firstly, to engage the viewers in the action and location (thus setting the tone for some of the intimacy that will be forwarded during the performance), and secondly, to actively suss out audience members who may be appropriate to join in on one of the scenes later in the evening.

This leads to an examination of the story and themes that Shakespeare offers the viewer. In his book *Love and Society in Shakespearean Comedy: A Study of Dramatic Form and Content*, Richard A. Levin posits "Is *Much Ado About Nothing* a disturbing comedy?" (110). Given that he is referring to a play written four hundred years ago, wherein a young lover publicly slanders and destroys his bride-to-be at the wedding altar, and women are generally referred to as being guilty of perpetual cuckoldry, I would suggest it is a fair cop. What's more, Claudio, the groom-to-be in question, is not alone in participating in a thick stew of deeply troubling events. The bride's father, a visiting prince, the prince's half-brother, and the half-brother's colleague all have a hand in the forward momentum of this deeply distressing key plotline.

And yet, *Much Ado* is also a much beloved play, filled with extraordinary wit, heart and passion. It offers us one of Shakespeare's most deliciously satisfying adult love stories: the "merry war" (1.1.51) and eventual loving truce and partnership of Beatrice and Benedick. This sparring couple's journey keeps the play aloft and buoyant. It also keeps me coming back for

more, when I might have otherwise dismissed the work for its cruelty and misogyny. In *Shakespeare After All,* Marjorie Garber describes it as Shakespeare's "great play about gossip. Everything is overheard, misheard or constructed on purpose for eavesdropping" (115). Another recent description of the work can be found in New York's *Time Out* magazine:

> This one has it all: sexual tension, flirtation, verbal zingers and (relatively) amusing clowns. The beautifully drawn love-hate relationship between…Beatrice and blustery, confirmed bachelor Benedick is more engaging to modern audiences than the supposed main plot, which hinges on an elaborate scheme of deception and vicious slut-shaming. A precursor to screwball comedies of the next four centuries—from Howard Hawks to Judd Apatow and Tina Fallon—*Much Ado* inspires belly laughs and romantic sparks—often at the same time (Cote. October 2016).

Like all of Shakespeare's comedies, it also ends with the celebration of a wedding. In this case, it is a double wedding involving the young nobleman and soldier Claudio to Leonato's daughter Hero, and the aforementioned mutual loathers and now lovers Beatrice and Benedick. This story takes place against the backdrop of the world of the idle rich. Its primary plotline is entrenched in patriarchy and cruel misogyny. As Carol Thomas Neely succinctly states in *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, at the end of the play "male control is re-established and women take their subordinate places in the dance" (57).

Central aspects of the play's gender politics and plot are perhaps far less palatable for a general audience in an era of #MeToo. "Vicious slut-shaming," always a brutally challenging concept, resounds with even more harsh complexity in our collective ears in the present. The *Time Out* review above was written in 2016. Much has shifted since that year. Much has shifted within the last twelve months. Much *continues* to shift as I write these words today.

I intend this production to engage and resonate with the High Park audience in 2019, as we negotiate these shifts collectively. My challenge with this, however, is generated by the assumption that this task may well be an impossible one right now. I wonder why we need to see

this play in 2019! In the same way, I cannot help but question why I might need to attend yet another production of *The Taming of the Shrew*—both plays being so very steeped in action and relationships governed by a patriarchal system. What can be learned? What can I possibly offer? Regardless of my love for Shakespeare and the extraordinary demands and gifts his work provides, I have found myself dangling. How can I, as a woman, as a feminist, and as an artist who desires to offer an audience compelling truths imagine telling these particular stories at this particular time on our planet? We are riding a precarious and thrilling swing in thought and action. We are in the throes of seeking a new dialogue and a new balance, as we redefine concepts and practices around the very nature of "truth".

Remembering that in art as in life the problem is generally the solution, I dive head-first into these challenges. I propose a vibrant and energizing directorial vision for Shakespeare in High Park. My own artistic and political dilemma around this play will become part of its framework and an intrinsic aspect of its comedic action. This translates into the character of Beatrice herself, grappling with her own dilemmas regarding the themes of the play. She will be wrestling actively with an inquiry that mirrors the inquiry of this thesis, even as she "lives" the journey of *Much Ado.* She will do this, or rather, the actor *playing* her will do this, from the most "Beatrice" of perspectives: with humour, truth and fierce intelligence.

For this production, Beatrice becomes a woman who desires to use comedy and stand-up as a way in which to wrestle with her own questions about love, marriage, and Shakespeare. The choice to have Beatrice use humour in the modern vernacular to connect the dots between Shakespeare's words and the world of this production strives to invite the audience into a deeper engagement with the story and with Shakespeare's language. Comedy allows us to manage our vulnerability and shame in a powerful, joyful, collective forum.

Prior to the start of the show, Beatrice will seek input from the audience about these questions. In this way, the spectators sitting on the hill will become participants in this inquiry. The material garnered from the audience at each performance, as well as new text to be created during rehearsal in collaboration with the actor portraying Beatrice, will be offered as the play begins. This material will also be interwoven through the entire performance. Beatrice becomes not only a character in the play, but also a kind of interlocutor for our communal investigations of its themes.

A PAUSE FOR A BREATH OF FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

The title above denotes a perspective that pre-supposes it is somehow outside the "norm." "Feminist Perspective" feels like a misnomer—a dated moniker. In 2019, I cannot imagine entering into the creation of *any* production, let alone one from Shakespeare's canon, *without* this perspective, as it is both subconsciously—and consciously—the lens through which I practice being a human on this planet. #MeToo/#TimesUp reminds me how strenuous a practice it is right now.

As I consider the expedition ahead for High Park, my recurring guidepost is author and comedian Deborah Francis-White's words from her podcast and book *The Guilty Feminist:* "Feminism can't exist in principle. It needs the oxygen of action" (18). A production of *Much Ado About Nothing* demands this oxygen of action; indeed, I suggest that all vibrant theatre has the same demand.

From here we journey to the play's origins and when audiences inhaled the play's vibrant action for the first time.

DATES AND SOURCES

Much Ado About Nothing, written in 1598-99, is considered a mid-career work of Shakespeare's. This comedy sits between two of his history plays: *Henry IV Part 2* and *Henry V*. The play, however, is not listed in the English writer and minister Francis Mere's *Palladis Tamia*, entered in the *Stationers' Register* on September 7, 1598. Also known as *Wit's Treasury, Palladis Tamia* was a compendium of English, Italian and classical text. In it, Mere wrote the following:

> As Plautus and Seneca are accounted the best for comedy and tragedy among the Latins, so Shakespeare among the English is the most excellent in both kinds for the stage. For comedy, witness his Gentlemen of Verona, his Errors, his Love's Labour's Lost, his Love's Labour's Won, his Midsummer Night's Dream, and his Merchant of Venice; for tragedy, his Richard the 2, Richard the 3, Henry the 4, King John, Titus Andronicus and his Romeo and Juliet (qtd. in Morris).

Much Ado was published in *Quarto* in 1600 and bears Shakespeare's name. The title page reads:

> "Much adoe About Nothing. *As it has been sundrie times publikely* acted by the right honourable, the Lord Chamberlaine his seruants. *Written by William Shakespeare*. London Printed by V(alentine). S(immes). For Andrew Wise and William Aspley. 1600" (Humphreys 2).

Actor Will Kemp, who is listed as having played Dogberry, left Shakespeare's acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, in 1599. It is believed that if Mere had known of the play in 1598, he would have included it in his compendium. Thus we have the general parameters of dates for when the text was written. We have "foul papers" (generally accepted as Shakespeare's manuscripts) for *Much Ado* that list the famous clown William Kemp for the part of Dogberry and Lord Chamberlain's Men actor Richard Cowley for Verges.

Love's Labour's Won

There is a theory that *Love's Labour's Won* (a play which no longer exists) is a sequel to *Love's Labour's Lost* or an alternate title for *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *As You Like It*, or *Much Ado About Nothing.* Several scholars refute the idea that it is an alternate title because the other titles were listed in Mere's *Palladis Tamia* alongside it. In 2014, the Royal Shakespeare Company produced a double-bill consisting of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Much Ado About Nothing.* The latter was billed as *Love's Labour's Won.* Artistic Director Greg Doran noted in the program brochure:

> So strong is my sense, that I am sticking my neck out to say that we have come to the conclusion that "Much Ado About Nothing" may have also been known during Shakespeare's lifetime as "Love's Labour's Won". We know Shakespeare wrote a play under this name, and scholars have debated whether this is indeed a "lost" work, or an alternative title to an existing play, just as "What You Will" is the alternative title to "Twelfth Night" (Morris).

Regardless of Doran's enthusiastic belief, this phantom play is a mystery that remains to be solved.

Much Ado appeared in the *First Folio* edition. Published in 1623, just seven years after Shakespeare's death, the *First Folio* is the first collected edition of the acclaimed author's plays.

Sources

No single source contains the exact plot of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Certainly, the story of a young woman falsely accused of unfaithfulness is an ancient one. Consensus has it that the Hero/Claudio plot was most likely inspired by Italian Matteo Bandello's second story in *La Prima Parte de le Novelle*, written around 1554. Messina is its setting and the characters include the don Piero—or Pedro of Aragon—and Lionato, the father of the slandered young woman named Fenicia. A young soldier named Timbreo di Cardona falls in love with Fenicia

and they are betrothed. However, their relationship is thwarted by one Girando, a friend of Timbreo's, who is in love with Fenicia. Girando spreads slander about the girl. Rather than any detailed description of a lascivious bed trick, Timbreo is deceived simply through making note of a ladder at Lionato's window. Unlike in *Much Ado*, Lionato does not doubt his daughter's fidelity and chastity. In fact, Timbreo questions his doubts. Fenicia, meanwhile, is literally dying of a broken heart. Just as she is being prepared for burial, she regains consciousness, the truth is uncovered and Lionato once again asks Timbreo to marry his daughter. In 1569, Francois de Belleforest translated Bandello's work into French. It is considered likely that Shakespeare was aware of this 16th century tale in one of the volumes of Belleforest's *Histoire Tragique.*

Another possible source is "Canto Five" in Ludovico Ariosto's Italian poem *Orlando Furioso* (1516). Set in Scotland, John Harrington translated it at Queen Elizabeth's behest in 1591. It holds a similar love story between Ariodante and Ginevra, a young princess who will die after being accused of being unchaste. The story is told by Dalinda, Ginevra's "treacherous maid" (Zitner 11), who, like Margaret, Hero's attendant, is also involved in impersonating her mistress during an observed sexual encounter. The story veers down other avenues and involves other characters but the similarities between it and *Much Ado* are clear.

The tale of Phedon and Claribell in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1596) follows a similar path and also includes a servant named Pyrene who engages in similar deeds and actions as that of Shakespeare's Margaret. Zitner notes another version of the Hero/Claudio story in George Whetstone's *Rock of Regard* (1576), where observances and overheard conversations advance the action. The Greek myth of Hero and Leander is yet another possible source, at least in its offering of a young woman longing for her lover, who swims across the sea to her every

night. The Hero of this tale, though, is a priestess of Aphrodite and she shares a regular sexual intimacy with Leander, something that is outside the realm of possibility in *Much Ado*.

The Beatrice/Benedick plot line appears to be inspired by Shakespeare's own imaginings. Kate and Petruchio from *The Taming of the Shrew* (1593-94), and prior to that, Lady Rosaline and Lord Berowne in *Love's Labour's Lost*, are cut from similar, if earlier cloths, as the sparring and witty Beatrice and Benedick.

The Title

In the *Arden Shakespeare*, A. R. Humphreys references Richard Grant White's 1858 edition of the play. In it, White observed that "'Nothing' and 'noting' in Elizabethan English sounded much the same" (Humphries 28). *Much Ado About Noting* is apt for a play whose action is primarily catapulted by constant observances, miscomprehensions and gossip. "Nothing" was also a pseudonym at the time for female genitalia. This certainly is the focus of the play: questions, concerns and causes around chastity form the foundation of the play's action and storytelling.

Much does happen during the week in which this play takes place. Personal, private and insular worlds do change by the end of the play. Gender wars are fought and there are wins and losses on both sides. The hard wall of patriarchy continues to stand, though some windows have been added. From a greater global perspective, however, not *much* occurs. The title is filled with the same irony and double entendre that Shakespeare offers within every scene in the play.

WOMEN DIRECTING SHAKESPEARE: AN OPPORTUNITY TO REFLECT

A key aspect of my research has involved several visits to the Stratford Festival Archives. Housed there are the directors' edited scripts of any and all of the productions they have helmed

at the Festival. Knowing that an important part of my job ahead was editing the text to a running time of approximately an hour and a half, this proved a golden resource. Recently, I found myself describing these edited drafts of *Much Ado* that I had combed through at the Archives as the cuts, thoughts and considerations created by "masters." There is no question that Michael Langham, Robin Phillips, Richard Monette, and William Hutt were extraordinary masters in their field with decades of experience feeding and fuelling their art, and I was thrilled and honoured to have the opportunity to gain insight into their productions of this play. A colleague with whom I was chatting excitedly, however, brought home an obvious point: these "masters" are men. Marigold Charlesworth was the only female director on the list, with honours going to Helen Burns who worked alongside her husband Michael Langham in 1983. These two women are in no way considered "masters". They do not come to the table with the same years of experience and renown as the men. This is not surprising. Nor is the fact that none of the directors are people of color. My excitement at having been able to examine these directors' scripts and glean highly useful and inspiring information for my own upcoming edits was tempered by the truth of gender and race inequity in my profession. Issues of equity, race and inclusion are part of my research and are addressed later in this paper.

In the meantime, discovering Elizabeth Schafer's book, *Ms-Directing Shakespeare,* has been inspiring, encouraging—and alarming. Published back in 2000, it feels entirely relevant in 2019. This compilation includes interviews with eight women who have directed major productions of Shakespeare's works. They speak of their visions, rehearsals, collaborations, reviews, investigations, challenges, frustrations, and successes. Schafer's introduction notes that aside from Deborah Warner and Ariane Mnouchkine, little has been written offering insight into the hands-on practices of female directors of Shakespeare's canon. According to Schafer this is

not due to any dearth of female directors, but rather that books about Shakespeare in performance have simply ignored them. "As women's voices have been silenced by their exclusion…(my) aim is to give prominence to these women's words, as they discuss their directing practice" (Schaffer 1).

I suggest that documentation of this kind of practical discussion for and about women directors is still a rarity in 2019. Theirs are invigorating perspectives and visions to engage in regardless of whether or not they align with one's own aesthetic. Some of the perspectives are unsettling and show evidence of internalized sexism at play. This is not surprising given the year in which this book was written.

In her chapter on *Much Ado*, Schafer interviews Australian theatre director Gale Edwards; and from the UK, theatre and opera director Helena Kaut-Howson, director and actor Di Trevis, and actor Dame Judi Dench (who directed a production in 1988).

Edwards set her production in a highly Italianate world of 1890's Messina, described as elegant and filled with grandeur. In contrast, her Dogberry and Verges engaged in commedia-style clowning—with Dogberry also acting as Master of Ceremonies (thus creating the show's framing device). The idea of a framing device is of interest and one that, as mentioned, I am incorporating myself. I must admit it was shocking to read Edward's description of Beatrice and Benedick:

> I love that frisson that is at the centre of the play, the untameable woman and the maverick of the outcast man. She's an old maid and she's a bit weird and everyone thinks she's too loud and too opinionated. He's equally unconventional (qtd. in Schaffer 73).

Beatrice described as an untameable old maid is challenging enough. Adding the comparison to the "maverick" that is Benedick is highly unsettling.

Dame Judi Dench's 1988 production was placed in the 19th century, with "lots of pretty white dresses for women and white, tight-fitting trousers for men" (79). According to Schafer it received unanimous praise. Dench said,

> The job of the director is to tell the story that the author has written…I wanted it to be Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, not Judi Dench's. As a director and as an actor, I don't believe in coming to rehearsals with preconceived ideas of how the play should ultimately turn out. The input of the actors is vital, as is a sense of humour (qtd. 80).

There is much to unpack in these words. In order to avoid a lengthy dialectic about directing in general, I will focus on her remarks about directing Shakespeare. I did not see this production but I am a huge fan of Dench's acting work and I am in full agreement with some of her thinking here. Her final sentence is already carved on my creative walls, if not my heart: having a sense of humour and receiving input from the actors are both essentials. I also agree that it is our job as directors to offer up the author's story. It is the definition of this idea that I question.

Intellectually I can appreciate Dench's sentiment around wanting the production to be Shakespeare's *Much Ado* and not *hers.* One surmises that she is referring to a desire not to add to or embellish the work. However, I would posit that the design, staging, costumes, lighting, and performances are all artistic forms of "embellishment." They are a result of choice and the perspective of the creators in the room and not Shakespeare's, regardless of how carefully one follows the text.

As I continue to visualize the upcoming production I ask myself hard questions about its proposed interventions and edits. I maintain that my thesis project is not guided by hubris and a desire to offer "Balkan's *Much Ado".* Rather, it is led by a desire to tell the story in such a way that might have resonance and be entertaining for our audience in Canada in 2019. I cannot imagine accomplishing this without interventions and edits, given the various parameters and exigencies of a production in the park. This thesis is also a test of my willingness to let go of fear

of failure in the sharing of my vision and in honoring the belief that it has artistic merit and legitimacy.

This is an excellent segue into Schafer's examination of Di Trevis'1988 production with the Royal Shakespeare Company. Set in the 1950's, Trevis' production got "panned so vitriolically that for years afterwards she woke every morning thinking of the denunciations contained in the reviews" (qtd. in Schafer 75). Schafer notes that the Beatrice/Benedick match "broke height taboos" (76), presumably with Beatrice being significantly taller of the two. She remarks that both actors were not considered "conventionally beautiful" (76). It received a "chorus of disapproval of quite unusual unanimity" (qtd. in Freeman 108). The production apparently highlighted gender dynamics, refusing to romanticize the Claudio/Hero relationship. It also emphasized class politics and was, according to writer and Shakespeare historian John Cox, "a scathing critique from a materialist-feminist perspective" (qtd. in Schafer 76).

Trevis' waking terrors are understandable. A director reading that she "should never be allowed within a five-mile radius of comedy…she painfully lacks a sense of humour" (*Financial Times*, April 1988), needs a hard shell. Trevis said afterwards,

> You can't afford not to plough straight on when you have had a failure. Although I've done a lot of work since then, my career has never gone back to the point it was at before *Much Ado About Nothing*, when I was turning down three times more work than I actually did" (qtd. in Schafer 79).

It is important to note that according to Schafer, the video recordings of the production belied the critical lambasting and showed the audience to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. Critical response can have a huge effect on one's career. Daring to step outside the box when directing a beloved comedy of Shakespeare's can be dangerous—at least, for a woman in 1988. The harsh response to Trevis' production gives me much to ponder, given that I myself lean toward a darker view of the events of this play.

The fourth director, Helena Kaut-Howson, set her 1997 Royal Exchange production in 1860 Sicily. She "managed the considerable feat of confronting the play's more unpleasant aspects, getting a lot of laughs, pleasing some of her most ardent critics and achieving a box office sell-out" (qtd. in Schafer 81). This is encouraging. Kaut-Howson explains, "We took the dark subplot—Hero's story, very seriously" (qtd. in Schafer 82). She describes fully playing into the violence perpetrated on Hero, first by Claudio and then by her father, Leonato. She asked the young actor playing Hero "How does Hero forgive Claudio?", and the young Irish Catholic woman responded, "Because she would have done the same if she had believed he betrayed her" (qtd. in Schafer 82). This is a simple truth that may be of use. At any rate, it is one possibility.

Although Claudio's remorse and subsequent forgiveness were offered with passion in the production, Kaut-Howson was not entirely sure about the happy ending of the play. I have these same questions. There is joy for some and uncertainty for others. Kaut-Howson mentions the need for "insecurity" in *Much Ado.*

The reviews praised the director's creation of "a world of women waiting for something to happen to them. In a word, men" (*The Times* 25 September 1997). The production offered "a definition of the women and their side of the patriarchal medallion" (*The Independent* 26 September 1997). Kaut-Howson was not interested in the "dangers" of a feminist approach to the production. "It is a limitation to impose a feminist view on an historical world which culturally could not have had those views" (qtd. in Schafer 83-84). This is her reason for setting it in 19th century costume. "Beatrice and Benedick could be properly modern but I could also put them in the context of their slightly remote world" (qtd. in Schafer 84).

I do not entirely agree with Kaut-Howson's reasoning about the "should" and "should nots" of imposing a feminist view on an historical world. Kate Hennig's extraordinarily

successful *The Queenmaker Trilogy*, comprised of *The Last Wife*, *The Virgin Trial* and the upcoming *Mother's Daughter*, is a successful example of this combination. Commissioned by The Stratford Festival and produced across the country, these highly-lauded plays all investigate women and power in the Elizabethan world using a fully contemporary, feminist lens. Yorgus Lanthimos' film *The Favourite*, set primarily in the chambers of Queen Anne's palace in the early 18th century, is another recent case in point. This award-winning film is a fierce, funny, "renegade", and "bawdy" (Travers. *Rolling Stone* November 2018) tale of powerful women navigating through the maze of patriarchy and monarchical strictures of the 1700's. These are but two examples that question the validity of Kaut-Howson's theory.

However, if she is speaking specifically about Shakespeare's work, her perspective has credence. As mentioned earlier, setting a play like *Much Ado About Nothing* in 2019 means coming upon artistic roadblocks and hiccups that, unless one does some significant re-writing and re-imagining, question the merit and legitimacy of the choice in terms of telling Shakespeare's story. By setting the High Park production in the late 1990's, we create Kaut-Howson's "slightly remote world" that proposes to allow us to engage fully in a "feminist perspective", while also preserving the integrity of the text. The additional material generated by Beatrice's moments of stand-up comedy and improvisation proposes to offer a strong container for this story as viewed from the audience's vantage point of 2019.

This leads to the view from yet another vantage point: the setting of the play.

LOCATION. LOCATION. LOCATION.

The play is set in Messina, a port in the northeastern part of Sicily on the Ionian Coast. Through the centuries Messina has been a transport hub and trading city, considered one of the gateways to and from the island. Founded by the Greeks in 8th century BC, it was initially

called *Zancle,* which translates as "a scythe". Legend has it that its founder was King Zanclus. As the city itself is shaped like a sickle, the derivation of its name holds on both counts.

William Shakespeare never visited this city, so it is a Messina of his imagination. However, as mentioned earlier, this port city was a key source for *Much Ado*, in Bandello's *La Prima Parte de la Nouvelle del Bandello.*

Richard Paul Roe, in his book *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy,* notes that Sicily's early history is filled with battles, rebellions and uprisings involving the French and the Italians, dating back to 1282. In 1240, the Sicilian government offered the crown to Pedro III of Aragon out of a desire to restore post-rebellion order. King Pedro "arrived immediately and drove off the French. Aragonese rule commenced, and from 1296 to 1402…the Aragon dynasty retained power—which devolved to the Spanish Crown and lasted until 1713" (Roe 218).

Messina, Ontario: a fictional town—a Messina of our imagination

I continue to ruminate about the possibilities of setting the play, whose plot "consists largely of upper-class conversation among friends and relatives who are at leisure to enjoy one another's company" (Levin 87), on or near Lake Rousseau or Lake Joseph in the Muskoka region. From an article in 2005 in the *New York Times*, "Muskoka is a region of lakes and jutting granite cliffs that recalls the breathtaking vistas of the Adirondacks. More recently, however, it has begun to feel more like Malibu, as film stars and the very rich erect trophy homes along its pristine shoreline. But not all the money is new. Captains of Canadian industry like the Labatts, Bronfmans and Eatons have spent summers here since the beginning of the 20th century. They were joined by Pittsburgh barons like Mellon and Carnegie, who built huge houses along a narrow channel on Lake Muskoka known as Millionaires Row. The rest of Ontario's cottage

country, however, remained middle-class. Torontonians of more modest means could afford a cabin on the lake" (Lee).

In many ways, it is the perfect Canadian replacement for Messina. The word "Muskoka" conjures wealth and privilege, but also a lazy relaxation that may not set the correct tone or edge for the play…or perhaps it does. Neil Freeman notes, "The enemy is within the gates of Messina. Beneath a thin veneer of civility, Messina is an anxious and insecure world where men hold their honours in a wary distance" (Othello 2.3.56). "Uneasy about their social position, anxious to advance their fortunes, the characters keep a watchful eye and as soon as they perceive danger, push cordiality aside" (115). For the purposes of the play, I might translate this as, "Who knows what lurks behind those exorbitant walls?"

Updating words and phrases: the challenge. You say Messina—I say Muskoka—Let's call the whole thing off—or not…

This retreat for the rich also happens to fit syllabically into Shakespeare's text. I have considered switching the textual references of Messina to Muskoka: "I learn in this letter that Don Pedro of Aragon comes this night to *Muskoka*" (1.1.1-2). This proves a clever substitution; too clever. Its cleverness highlights itself and thus, might take the viewer out of the play upon hearing it. This is part and parcel of the challenge of updating words and phrases in Shakespeare's plays, something that I am planning to offer with caution and care. "Clever" does not always translate as "smart." Setting it in a fictional Messina, Ontario, may allow for more freedom to create and imagine the possibilities of this world and its inhabitants, rather than feel tied to the exigencies of historical fact of an actual region. I will test the waters of "Muskoka" in rehearsal, but I suspect there may be far more to be gained by swimming in the Muskokas of the *mind* rather than the *tongue.*

FROM WASHINGTON TO CANADA

I knew I wanted to set the story in Canada. I wanted to offer that kind of immediacy for its audience. I never would have imagined that Monica Lewinsky would help guide me.

In 2015, Lewinsky began speaking publicly about her affair with President Bill Clinton between the years of 1995 and 1997. She was a twenty-two-year-old intern at the White House when the affair began. This became public knowledge after she privately confessed the affair to her co-worker and friend, Linda Tripp, who had surreptitiously recorded the phone conversations and then forwarded them to White House lawyer and former U.S. Solicitor General Kenneth Starr. The news of the affair splashed all over newspapers, television, radio, and magazines.

Social media was still a thing of the future in 1998. The Web was still fairly new. I remember cheering at the discovery of high-speed internet, so much better than the turtle-like "dial-up" connections I was using. The art of online blogging was only in its embryonic state. This was pre-Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. However, the speed with which the news spread was still relatively mercurial. During her TED Talk, Monica confesses, "Overnight I went from being a completely private figure to a publicly humiliated one worldwide. I was branded as a tramp, tart, slut, whore, bimbo, and of course: that woman" (2015). In a *New York Times* article in 2015 she described herself as the "Patient Zero of losing personal reputation on a global scale. Almost instantaneously" (Bennett 2017). The shaming was universal. Even strong feminists chimed in: "My dental hygienist pointed out she had third-stage gum disease," said Erica Jong. Betty Friedan dismissed her as "some little twerp" (Bennett 2017).

This event was a part of the dawning of public shaming on a global scale. I began to consider that the late 90's might prove to be the perfect fit. This is a time that will be familiar to much of the High Park audience and yet, is fully twenty years ago. Smart phones were not yet

attached to our collective hips and minds, but clearly, shaming and sexualized bullying on a global scale had been birthed. This could prove a vibrant backdrop for *Much Ado About Nothing.*

Contemplating the acts of bullying in the play, I head into an investigation of a character that is a key fabricator of its forward momentum in the story.

DON JOHN: DISRUPTING ASSUMPTIONS

Who is Don John? In both the Quarto and Folio editions the character is listed as John the Bastard. The character is not publicly described as such until later in the play. Still, the description is provided in the text upon the first entrance of the soldiers in Act One. Shakespeare organizes their arrival as: Don Pedro, Claudio, Balthazar, and John the Bastard. So, before even reading the text, a type of hereditary "profiling" occurs. Bastards in Shakespeare's works are equated with evil and villainy. One is predisposed to be suspicious of the character. Philip the Bastard in *King John*, the Greek slave Thersites, King Priam's bastard son Margarelon in *Troilus and Cressida*, and Edmund in *King Lear* are some of the most well-known examples of villainous bastards. In *The Tempest,* Prospero refers to the ill-treated, half-human, half-beast, Caliban—the son of the witch Sycorax—as "a bastard one." In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes desires to "dash out" (2.3.141) the brains of their newborn daughter Perdita because he believes her to be the bastard offspring from a wrongly perceived affair between his wife and his best friend Polixenes.

As a bastard, Don John is seemingly "filled of the dangerous discontent attributed to illegitimacy" (Zitner 38). This is in keeping with the general response and assumptions regarding bastardy in Elizabethan England. Dr. Jeffrey R. Wilson, in his online project *Stigma in Shakespeare,* offers that Don John is "tagged and treated as inferior on the basis of some innate aspect of his identity."

Beyond the presumed ignominy of being born out of wedlock, the negative labeling of the character is extensive. In 1904, in *Shakespeare and his Predecessors,* Frederick Boas pulls no punches in his fierce, biblical description of Don John as a "social Ishmaelite who sees every man as a natural enemy…a very deathbed at a feast" (306). According to Carol Thomas Neely in her *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays*, he is a "conventional villain" (42). In his *Further Explorations*, L. C. Knights describes the character: "Clearly he is related to Richard of Gloucester and Iago. Their common characteristic is an egotism that clenches itself hard against the claims of sympathy and is unwilling to change…and…the opposite of a character who is 'open' to others. He is simply, perversely a melancholy man" (115). In the Riverside Shakespeare, Anne Barton refers to Don John as "a thing of darkness out of step with society" who "hates children of light simply because they generate radiance in a world he prefers to see dark…a plot mechanism more than a complex character and appears in the play as a kind of anti-comic force, the official enemy of all happy endings" (128). He is "distinguished from his retinue by his lack of interest in courting a woman," according to Richard A. Levin in *Love and Society in Shakespearean Comedy*. "All we can say for sure is that he lives in a world of men and focuses his resentment on them" (94). This latter description of Levin's is key to the Don John of my production.

As a theatre artist who revels in the psychological spelunking necessary to reveal potential motives for a character's behaviour, and one whose own recent practice has focused on delving into the complexities of truths, fictions and grey areas, these depictions and descriptions inspire an investigation. Why is Don John, as his colleague Conrad wonders, "thus out of measure sad" (1.3.1-2)? What has actually happened to cause this "sadness"? The text offers few details beyond some unnamed friction between the half-brothers. Perhaps there is

more substance and weight to Don John than the dismissive descriptions present. I propose that this is a character holding much importance in the world of the play. Indeed, Don John's actions spark both the unraveling that occurs and the eventual enlightenment that follows.

I was delighted and somewhat relieved to discoverer Natasha L. Richter's article in *Inquiries Journal*, "A Second Look at Don John, Shakespeare's Most Passive Villain." I was well along in my own thoughts about this character when I came upon Richter's writing. It re-affirmed some of my choices involving the role and its casting. She speaks of the "hypocritical society, which rejects him from the very moment of his birth." Exactly. Don John doesn't stand a chance, really. Returning to the character's opening "few words," Richter posits, "Don John notices the undercurrent of distrust directed towards him. Through this simple statement, (he) acknowledges society's perpetual distrust of him." Don John offers an astute confession about his predicament and behaviour:

> I am trusted with a muzzle and enfranchised with a clog;
> therefore I have decreed not to sing in my cage. If I had my
> mouth, I would bite; if I had my liberty, I would do
> my liking: in the meantime let me be that I am and
> seek not to alter me (1.3.30-35).

Richter observes there is an "utter honesty" that this character offers. I agree. Here we have a world that revolves around personal, political, social, and sexual lies being perpetrated, celebrated, navigated, and forwarded. All wear masks. It is true that Don John is among the wearers. However, it is important to recognize that the lies this character dispatches eventually unleash *truths* for *all,* which result in a kind of a "birth of a new society" and "a renewed sense of social integration" that Northrop Frye marks as the pattern in all of Shakespeare's comedies. Armoured hearts become vulnerable; a father hopefully learns to trust in his progeny; a young woman's rose-coloured glasses about love are removed; cruelty perpetrated by a young brash,

volatile and privileged soldier is recognized, if not fully admitted; forgiveness is in the air; people learn more about themselves and those around them; misogyny is questioned; and the perceived hero Claudio, has, according to Frye, "some experience which proves to be therapeutic and at the end of the play is ready to exhibit more moral behavior." At least, one hopes that this is the case for Claudio.

Returning to Levin's remark about Don John living in a world of men and focusing his resentment on them, I have chosen to have this character played by a woman—*as* a woman; in the case of this production: a woman of colour. I look forward to discovering, through the rehearsal process, how this choice forwards both the story and the investigation of the play's themes.

THE MILITARY: A ROMANTIC FRAMEWORK FROM THE LATE 90's

Operation Recuperation

In 1998, an ice storm hit southern Quebec, Eastern Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and parts of Northern New York State and Maine. It is considered one of the largest natural disasters in Canadian history. It killed thirty-five people, injured 945 and approximately 600,000 persons were displaced. Economies were disrupted, ecosystems were damaged, livestock was lost, transmission lines were felled, and over 100,000 people endured power outages, some for longer than a month. "Environment Canada aptly called it…the ice storm of the century" (Pritchard CBC January 4 2018). Mike Harris, the premier of Ontario at the time, said, "It's hard to understand, from the papers or the TV pictures, just how extensive [the damage] is…To those that we still have to get power to: in some cases, it is going to be weeks.

But we understand the situation. We're doing everything we can. Hang in there" (qtd. in Pritchard 2018).

The Canadian Armed Forces posted approximately15,000 troops, making it the largest deployment of Canadian troops since the Korean War. I was not among those who had need for rescue during the ice storm. However, the image of Canadians soldiers coming to the country's aid captured my imagination. Here were soldiers who were engaged in a rescue mission involving a fierce battle—with Mother Nature. For me there is a romanticism to this that cannot be denied.

Other nature-related operations occurred around this general time. In January 1999, Toronto Mayor Mel Lastman called out 400 troops to do battle with a massive winter storm that dropped 35-45 centimeters of snow on the city. 800 soldiers were standing by. Despite the controversy around Lastman's choice to deploy the troops and the costs it incurred, "Troops from CFB Petawawa drove Bisons across the city—armoured vehicles capable of carrying patients and paramedics" (P. Weather Network 2015). Operation Assistance in 1997 saw approximately 8,500 troops sent out to help with evacuations and the re-building of dykes in North Dakota and Manitoba due to the Red River flood. Troops were sent to Honduras for Operation Central in 1998 as a response to Hurricane Mitch. In addition to the missions doing battle with the environment, there were also several peacekeeping and observational missions around this time. Troops joined coalition forces in 1998's Desert Thunder in the Persian Gulf as well as taking on NATO-related missions in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iraq, and Kuwait.

The soldier as rescuer from the wrath of Mother Nature is the same soldier who may have been involved in assorted operations abroad. So, military men like Prince Don Pedro or Benedick could well have joined the 4500 troops deployed in the Gulf War's Operation Friction in 1991.

Certainly, young Claudio, a highly-praised soldier, would have been involved in Desert Thunder in 1998. What were his experiences there? Was there trauma? In the play is Claudio's volatility the result of privilege, naiveté, perhaps a smaller intellectual capacity, or is his behaviour PTSD-related?

This research leads me to imagine the military personnel in 1998 as having the darkness of the experience of war alongside the glow and romanticism of heroism. I can envision them travelling from Petawawa to the fictional Messina, Ontario, for a vacation: a furlough between duties.

In Shakespeare's original, the character of Don Pedro is the Spanish Prince of Aragon. Aragon might have reminded the Elizabethan audience of Henry VIII's beloved first wife, Catherine of Aragon. In 2019, it is highly unlikely that this reference will resonate with the entire High Park audience. As well, specifying our Don Peter as a Spaniard in this Canadian context feels like it creates a kind of red herring for the audience that has no pay-off. I have chosen a different militaristic route for this role. Our character is introduced as Don Peter of Bombardier.

In 1998, Bombardier was listed as the second largest military contractor (Epps 2001). Thus, Don Peter is not only a prince but also becomes a powerful CEO/Chairman of the Board at this firm with intrinsic links to war. Anything is possible in fictional Messina. It must be noted that a "Bombardier" was also a military rank in the artillery regiments of the 16th century, and still is in the Royal Canadian Artillery, where "Bombardier" is equal in rank to "Corporal".

A commitment to continue extending my reach in the envisioning of a production of Shakespeare for a contemporary audience led me to participate in the following events.

EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION: EXPERIENTIAL RESEARCH

In the fall of 2018, I attended two separate workshops focusing on inclusionary practices when envisioning and directing productions of Shakespeare's plays. The desire to participate was predicated firstly by my own questions around directing this production of *Much Ado About Nothing*, and secondly, to engage in the larger inquiries on our collective tables regarding presenting Shakespeare's works in the 21st century.

The first event was a day-long conference sponsored by the Stratford Festival of Canada, entitled *Critically Contemporary: Classical Theatre in a Contemporary World*. The aim of the gathering, according to its invitation, was:

> …to unpack the Western gaze in Shakespeare's works, and investigate the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in presenting these works in a Canada that is wrestling with Truth and Reconciliation, gender equity, and cultural representation. How have we, do we, and can we approach these works artistically within our contemporary zeitgeist? Can we expand the lens through staging and study to connect with more diverse artists and audiences?

There is so much to unpack. It was heartening to see so many artists from across the country in attendance: we were directors, actors, writers, and producers of all backgrounds, ethnicities, artistic practices, and aesthetics. Our common bond was a need to engage in essential questions about why and how to produce Shakespeare in our changing culture. The inquiries centered on the topics of appropriation, empowerment and the need for safe spaces for conversations and disagreement *within* those conversations. With apologies to his *Julius Caesar*, "We came *not* to bury Shakespeare *nor* to praise him". We gathered to participate in group dialogue about a subject we hold dear and one that provides distinct challenges for us at present.

The day included a session led by new Soulpepper Artistic Director Weyni Mengesha and Professor Aleza Alice Joubin from Washington State University. In three short hours, we all offered each other hard questions and concerns around issues of racism, hetero-normative

patriarchy and misogyny in Shakespeare's writing and in production. Examples of productions that investigate a variety of forms into the canon were cited. Among them was Dash Arts' multi-lingual, acrobatic *Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Tim Supple; *Piya Behrupiya (Twelfth Night),* filled with music, directed by Atul Kimar and produced by India's The Company Theatre; and Toronto's Ravi Jain's re-imagining of *Prince Hamlet,* which includes a deaf artist playing Horatio and the use of ASL throughout the storytelling.

The discussion at our lunchtime round table was on the topic 'Addressing The Gender Binary.' Director, writer and Project Humanity Artistic Director Andrew Kushner facilitated the discussion, led by artist Mel Hague from Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto. A key conversation for me, and one in which I had to get beyond my own white, cisgender female, middle-class discomfort, was how to reach out to artists who identify as gender fluid when considering casting. Mel noted that queer artists who have spent the majority of their practice being marginalized might ignore notices for auditions involving classical text. The sense of exclusion has been pervasive. It becomes understandable that an artist identifying as trans or gender fluid who has not felt welcome to come to the table ceases to make any attempts to do so. Mel expressed the need to actively seek out and invite artists into the process.

Given my desire to engage in equitable perspectives and practices for the upcoming Shakespeare in High Park, the conference whetted my appetite for more. A month later I headed to Alberta for a workshop sponsored by the Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity and Theatre Alberta.

Staging Contemporary Shakespeare

Dawn Monique Williams, a director, actor and educator working at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF), led participants in a three-day exploration of equity, diversity and

inclusion. The goal of the workshop was to re-examine and re-contextualize approaches to classical work.

OSF is a regional repertory company based in Ashland, Oregon. They produce a wide variety of shows with Shakespeare as the foundation, much in the same way as our Stratford Festival of Canada. It is a company widely recognized in the United States as being at the forefront of inclusionary practices and productions, to which their manifesto speaks. Most recently, their revival of the musical *Oklahoma*, involving same sex couples and LGBTQ2 casting, transferred to Circle in the Square Theatre in New York City to much critical acclaim. From their manifesto (found on the company's website):

> OSF invites and welcomes everyone. We believe the inclusion of diverse people, ideas, cultures and traditions enriches both our insights into the work we present on stage and our relationship with each other. Social justice is central to our mission and we are committed to diversity in all areas of our work and our audiences.

This workshop gave a group of approximately twenty theatre directors working in this genre an opportunity to investigate texts, conceptualizing, casting, and rehearsal practices from the perspective of inclusionary practices. I was disappointed to discover upon arriving that there were few other artists of colour in the room besides Monique. This fact translated into recognizing that the conversations ahead would lack the greater perspective and resulting sticky conversations that I craved. Still, Monique created a safe space for us to investigate these layered and complex topics together. Of key interest for me were discussions around our ability to recognize and then make choices around the racism, misogyny, exoticism, and colonialism entrenched in Shakespeare's texts, vis-a-vis the storytelling a director and acting company hope to forward in a production.

The inquiry included the familiar highlighting of the postcolonial discussions around not just the text, but also the casting of certain roles: the character Caliban in *The Tempest*, for

example. Despite our inclusionary intentions, the character continues to be cast quite regularly as a person of colour, and costumed with a physical deformity. The 2018 Stratford production of the play was no exception, with actor Michael Blake performing the role wearing reptilian scales covering portions of his body.

We discussed the continued exoticism on stage of characters like Cleopatra, who in real life did not resemble Elizabeth Taylor in the iconic film of the same name produced in 1963. We spent time examining assorted texts for negative references to race, which exist in abundance. The purpose was not necessarily to extract these references blindly, but rather to consider them and make choices about the theatrical ramifications of their inclusion or extraction. A common sticking point for modern productions of *Much Ado* would be Claudio's often-noted derogatory line below:

> Leonato: Are you yet determin'd today
> To yet marry with my brother's daughter?
>
> Claudio: I'll hold my mind were she an Ethiope (5.4.25-38).

If a director desires to highlight Claudio's ignorance and intolerance, supported by Leonato's silence, they would include this passage. The audience understands that Hero may be in for a hard, cruel ride ahead. If an actor of colour is playing Hero, this adds to our imagining of a deeply unhappy life ahead for the girl. Depending on the production, this might be of interest. Generally, these lines are cut.

Questions about race and casting continue to emerge that prove we still have more equitable roads to travel. A production of *Much Ado* was performed during the summer of 2018 at the Old Globe Theatre in San Diego. One of the reviews eschewed the possibility of siblings being biracial:

> No dissertation here, but the strange pairing of two brothers as black and white instead of siblings that are both black or both white feels—as with some of the other ensemble members—like casting for the sake of diversity, not the best actors for the roles. Our world has gone beyond color-blind casting to casting for the sake of inclusion, and it's affecting the quality of the most important ingredient: the best cast we can get (Frankel, *Stage and Cinema*).

I did not see this production and so cannot speak to the quality of the acting. However, it is dismaying to read so culturally myopic a review of a production taking place in the second largest city in California. Clearly, at least for this reviewer, skin tone defines possibility. Why is it so hard to imagine siblings who are biracial in this day and age?

JUST A FEW WORDS ON FAILURE

In her thesis at Queen's University, theatre artist and director Sarah Garton Stanley, wrote:

> My creation and rehearsal process includes failure, and to the detriment of my professional success, may well be led by it too. I am inextricably linked to the following question: How far can I go before hitting the failure point? And having hit it, will I know it? And why am I thusly intrigued? Because truth, for me, lives here. (Failure Theatre, January 2013).

It has taken me many years to honour and celebrate the rigorous practice of failure. Or rather, to recognize how this practice is so very essential. I would suggest that I have not yet mastered its art. It remains a goal. I do not mean to imply that I enjoy it. It feels awful. I see it, however, as a necessity if my creative work is to continue to grow in width and depth and breadth. I am getting better at breathing in that liminal space between fear and taking action. Exactly how I will practice during the day-to-day of the upcoming rehearsal process remains to be discovered. When I work with students and young artists this practice is an easy one. In fact, I encourage failure from all involved and make a regular example of my own failures as a director. I will fuck up and state quite clearly that a choice of mine didn't work, a direction was lousy, or an articulation of a moment was poor. These admissions make me a better director. My public

acknowledgements of my directorial snafus inspire those around me to be as fearless as I am. And thus the work grows stronger. I do this in the professional milieu as well, but with more caution. I am aware of professional judgement. I have been able to create a professional context—a room wherein the surprise of failure is embraced—a room replete with… surprise!

I have been an actor in productions of Shakespeare's plays. I have also assistant directed on two or three productions. Shakespeare in High Park, however, marks my first time directing his work. I am doing this with a company of artists who have been in his plays, many of whom have greater experience than I with his language. I will learn from them. I have no doubt about this. Am I able to stay grounded in the fact that they will also learn more about themselves and the play, through the process ahead led by *me?* Number three of Garton Stanley's Failure Manifesto will guide me:

> Failure is beautiful. One of the best moments of an otherwise uninspiring show was when one of the English language's finest living actresses was beset by a tickle in her throat. A clearing ... No, not enough ... An outright coughing ... Then ... Poised ... A sip ... then another ... of water. An entire audience held rapturously in the failure of this moment to suspend our dulled loyalty to the doldrums of disbelief. What a moment! She coughed! Life! I would pay top dollar to see that again. But not the show that surrounded it. No, not the show (5).

I long to direct and collaborate on a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* that will offer this kind of beauty.

MY PRIMARY GUIDE

The play itself is my primary source of investigation: its language, its action, its use of rhetoric, its wit, its characters, and its journey. These guide me. They will continue to do so through the entire rehearsal process. The perpetual uncovering of its layers demands extraordinary rigour on my part and extends to all who are collaborating on the production.

I propose that in letting go of my own assumptions (based on academic research and accounts of past productions) or any preconceived ideas about the ways in which Shakespeare "should" be done and has been done, the more I will be able to discover and reveal the authenticity of this particular journey ahead in High Park. I return daily to investigating the ways in which Shakespeare's characters speak, what they do to and with each other, and what they want from one another. I continue to unearth more specifics about the setting for the play, its history, its societal norms, its laws and its patterns that either seek to be withheld or beg to be broken. I continue to ask "why" at every step. This is my primary research and practice with regards to the work. It is the onion I continue to peel as I become more intimate with the play, its world and its people. This private intimacy extends to embrace discussions with the show's designers. It will extend further in the rehearsal hall, where the unpeeling and unmasking, the revealing and emerging will become active and messy and present: the genre of being human.

CHAPTER TWO: DIRECTOR'S JOURNAL EXCERPTS

Tuesday, May 14th

First day of rehearsal. Offering the introduction to a full house!! It was invigorating and also more than a tad daunting. It seemed as though the entire company—all inhabitants of the building—were there in the room. It was among the largest circles of introduction I've experienced. Very cool to see and meet all of these people, a number of whom I had not had the pleasure of meeting yet. The first day of rehearsal always buzzes with the getting-to-know-yous and also the hope of being able to inspire and jazz the cast for the rehearsal ahead. In this case, it was about meeting and jazzing the entire village! Quite something. I was relieved that I ended up having a conversation about gender and global politics in 2019 just prior to starting my introduction. It certainly put things into perspective. It also provided an excellent segue into a discussion about 2019 and the challenges around "*why* Shakespeare" and "*how* Shakespeare" today, as these questions form the foundation of my inquiry. I began the discussion *with* this inquiry.

I made a point of offering stand-up as part of the intro, but was also aware of my purposely doing it badly. I didn't want to appear to be 'showing off' to the crowd, especially when there is an actor playing the role and one who will be collaborating on the stand-up. I also wanted to be able to show the failure of the attempts at stand-up—how hard it can be, how human it is. OK, am I kidding myself here? Was my poor stand-up really on purpose? Did I sabotage myself in order to highlight an idea? Or, does the truth lie closer to the fact that stand-up IS bloody hard and I just froze in the moment. Ha! Perhaps a bit of both!

Damn it, I forgot to mention that the actor Rose Napoli was collaborating. All the more reason to make certain that she is given proper public credit going forward. An imperative.

I was pleased that I had taken time to put up dozens of images on a large board that we had been given for this purpose. It is plastered with photos. There is a messiness to it that on the one hand serves the ideas I hope to forward. On the other hand, does it also present an overly busy mind that tentacles outward in multiple ways at once? Is that a bad thing? Can one play, one production hold all of these ideas?

The cast is a good one. The brief discussion around the table was rich and positive, with people talking about what they love about the play and what they wonder or have questions about. It is always a good way in which to learn more about the cast and stage management—asking them to articulate, briefly, a specific thing they love or they question. It also begins to create the sense of collaboration in the room. It was a shared day between both shows, so the discussion was brief. I look forward to hunkering down in a couple of days. How will the schedule of day-on/day-off rehearsals work for all? Will it feel like a bit of a bouncing ball? We won't have secondary rehearsals for several days yet, as both shows will need full casts for the table work ahead.

Thursday, May 16th

You know, one never knows how a cast will take to warm-up games. I am so pleased that they all seem to love the clap/circle game. It is a brilliant vocal and physical energizer. They also seem to adore the ball game "GO." Phew! One never knows. I am such a believer in playing these kinds of games, most especially when heading up on our feet to play a scene, but even in terms of the way in which it informs table work. They clear the mind and get the body vibrating. They also put one in a child's mind—an essential. We will be clapping and GO-ing a lot in the coming days! I am excited to use the sticks in a few days as well, as they are tremendous for uncovering visceral rather than intellectual relationship history.

Saturday, May 18th

Table work continues. I made mention of what our Directing Mentor Peter Hinton has referred to as "The Ghosts of Shakespeare": playing the *idea* of what is "supposed" to be played—ideas from some memory of another production or described by critics and historians. It is so easy to fall into this pattern—for myself as well. I mentioned this because it was clear during the table read that an *idea* was being played rather than the uncovering of something deeper. A couple of actors questioned me about this phrase. I could see egos bristling a little bit. I can understand this. Perhaps this is a phrase better kept under wraps so as not to unwittingly disrespect actors' talent and technique? Clearly, that seems to be the case for some. I dunno. I suppose my own ego about the work is generally about going deeper in order to uncover truths. I am constantly questioning and pushing through my own assumptions about the material. Still, navigating a wide variety of age, experience and expertise in the room means … well… paying attention. There will be much paying attention ahead as the wide range of personalities is apparent, even on this second day.

Today I tried some more exercises that were new to me. They were wonderful in terms of keeping everyone in the room engaged through table work, which can be a slog, but which is essential for this kind of text and language. Peter had suggested a terrific exercise: the cast collectively comes up with synonyms of the particular word being investigated. Why did Shakespeare use THAT word? What does it mean? We looked at antonyms as well. This is such a good way to grasp and hold and own the language!

Another tremendous exercise involved dividing the group into two units. Each unit stood behind the particular character involved in the given scene and would coach them forward—as though they are their (noisy) inner conscience. TERRIFIC! It keeps the scene work so true and

surprising and also: fun. FUN can disappear when doing table work. And there are a couple of actors who do not care for table work. They want to be up on their feet. Table work CAN be up on one's feet. It should become as fully vibrant. It often does not as the sense of being chair-bound can tighten and de-energize actors. Get up, I say! Keeping the fun alive in the room is key. It is also: fun.

Sunday, May 19th

We went to High Park today. This was a brilliant idea and an important use of time. Initially, I was concerned about losing time for table work. However, the usefulness of having the group experience the park setting and the bare deck cannot be measured. Severn Thompson and I led different exercises on the deck—status work, movement work, vocal work. I did some tableau work for each act. Mostly, though, it offered inspiration for all. A number of the actors in the company have performed in High Park. A number have not. It was beneficial for all. Laura Baxter, the Production Stage Manager, had cut up watermelon for us all. What a perfect thing! AND— Rose used it in a bit of scene work on the deck. Well. This is a keeper. Beatrice will now be eating watermelon during the "gulling" scene. I will ask whether or not the budget allows for this kind of running prop!

Tuesday, May 21st

I was trying to tell Rose today about how comedy allows her—and us—to wage the "war" with mind, heart, and humour, and come out "truer" and more human—to show ourselves. Rose is understandably nervous and insecure about the stand-up—the writing and the performing. I get this. It *is* a challenging endeavour! At the same time, this is a navigation that must be attended to. I want to support her in every way that I can, while also forwarding the

material and the idea. These private sessions with her are important, but I also recognize what a vulnerable thing it is—to write comedy and try out comedy—for an audience of one who is listening for the writing rather than performing the role of the regular audience. So hard! We will continue to seek the most productive steps forward together.

Saturday, May 25th

I have sent a list of information to Rose: events from 1998/99. These were handed out and available to all on the first day of rehearsal. It is always interesting to note which actors avail themselves of information provided, and which do not. I think: LOOK AT THEM!! THEY WILL BE USEFUL! Of course, though, it is up to me to explain *why* and *how* they will be useful. My hope is that they will provide the actors with little tidbits that they can use IN the show—bits of tossed-off dialogue perhaps upon entering or exiting. If nothing else, they help to turn the clock back twenty years in our collective minds.

I am pleased that Rose is taking this information on. The stand-up material off the top of the show must include 1998/99 references as a way in which to guide the audience into the world of this production. The challenge of course, is to include the *right* amount without it appearing to be a laundry list of exposition.

Friday, May 31st

We started the day with everyone having to do a stand-up—I suggested one minute but all went beyond. The themes: love, marriage—and bonus points if they included bits of Shakespeare. OH MY! This cast—each and every one—were fabulous and so damn funny. They stood at the microphone and showed *themselves.* So good!

All of this happened because of a conversation I had had with Rose. She felt that watching others do it would help her through her own fear. For my part, the hope—that was realized—was that Rose would see that the stand-up is successful and joyful and funny when folks just speak truthfully and show themselves. None of the cast are professional stand-up comics. And yet, I would have been very happy to have listened to ANY of them in a comedy club. They were that good. They were that true. They offered themselves: their foibles and failures. Regardless of the particular story, we can all relate to the crazy struggles of living and seeking love and connection and the need to laugh at our humanness amidst the multiple hopes, desires and social/political/personal constructs with which we are faced. It was such a hopeful, joyful and surprising endeavour. I hope that offered the support for Rose that she needed. Discomfort at getting up keeps her from finding her joy. I imagine I would be terrified as well. Perhaps. And yet, when she DOES get up, she is truly tremendous. Does she know how good she is?

I am also highly interested in those moments that are NOT ideal. Beatrice is NOT a fully-professional and wildly-successful busy comic. She is WORKING on her comedy routine. Watching failure up there is also of interest. Hell, comics deal with jokes that don't work all the time. I am SO interested in this dynamic. What and when does Beatrice struggle with comedy? How is this informed by what happens to her in the play? The need for success here can easily tighten up the actor though, preventing a deeper, artistic exploration of this kind of delicious failure. We shall see how this plays itself out.

For today though—what an incredible, funny communal event!! And what a cast! I audiotaped it all.

Sunday, June 2nd

Last night I began to feel uncomfortable about the fact that I had audiotaped the stand-up sessions, sans asking permission. I had planned to mention this first thing. And then…the moment I arrived at rehearsal, Laura, our Stage Manager, mentioned that it was not cool for me to record anything sans asking the company first. Yes! I asked if anyone had said anything to her. This was not to seek out a name but rather... well… had I been in the company, *I* would have said something!

Of course I started out the day with my apologies to the company and my clear willingness to do with the recording as they wished: I could send it to them or they could watch me delete it. They were appreciative, though I suspect they all thought that I was offering this only because someone had complained, when this was not the case at all. By end of day, no-one had asked me to do anything with the recording. So I reminded them to talk amongst themselves and let me—or Laura—know.

I had videotaped an exercise with them: just them walking about noting each other …I did not tell them the purpose of the exercise ahead of time. Lesson learned. I am used to doing this sort of thing with students who are constantly in a state of trust and learning. Some professionals are NOT in this state. I think about myself in rehearsal mode when I am acting. I tend to trust the suggestion rather than having to ask: WHY.

I think, though, this exercise would have been more successful and had more buy-in from all had I explained the reasons for it. But you know, I just assumed that it would be of interest. Still, it was not *un*-successful. Some bought in right away and eventually all got into it in some form or other. And it will definitely inform a moment of storytelling I want to create: a physical

montage of sorts where we get to see the characters travelling through their day and noting each other.

Friday, June 7th

I have been thinking about the end of the play: once everyone knows that Benedick and Beatrice are to be married, Benedick blurts, "Peace, I will stop your mouth" (5.4.97). This is to keep her from offering any more witticisms and to publicly seal their love. I agree with Carol Thomas Neely's assessment in her book *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* that "This kiss may be seen as marking the inequality that Beatrice feared in marriage" and also re-establishes the male role in the nuptials. Yes, it *may*. But *must* it do so?

In Act 2 Claudio and Hero get engaged. Hero is speechless and Beatrice tells her to "Speak cousin, or if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss and let him not speak, neither" (2.1.307-309). A bit of Shakespearean 'tit for tat' occurs. At the end of the play, Benedick says he will stop Beatrice's mouth with a kiss. True. The stage directions following the line note that they kiss. True. I can't help but wonder how both female *and* male audience members in 2019 will feel upon seeing a man physically forward a kiss sans consent. Does it make sense to highlight this action, or perhaps investigate alternatives? Regardless of how happy one is that these two have come together and that love is a many complex, splendoured thing, this physical act would stand out and sour the moment for me. Accessing the 'feminist perspective', perhaps the moment can be discovered in a different manner. Could Beatrice not pause the moment and then initiate it herself? Alternatively, could both Beatrice and Benedick—and the actors portraying them—pause and *breathe* in this moment and discover a way forward? There are myriad possibilities to be explored in rehearsal of these kinds of moments. All of them involve the oxygen of action. I am excited to investigate this.

Friday, June 14th

I was asked to come in early for a meeting with the two equity deputies today. My first thought: oh no what have I done? What complaints are there about this process? However, the moment I sat down it was clear that this was not the case. Both deputies, Richard Lam and Heath V. Salazar, wanted to express a concern about cultural appropriation. I was unaware that I had crossed a line. It is a gentle line but a line nonetheless. In asking artists to use their own language in the show, I had imagined that I was, in fact, opening up doors for an audience. My hope was that it would offer a greater reflection. I had not really fully considered the trope of, say, the Spanish house worker. Or what it might seem for a Turkish man to be seen in handcuffs (the latter is informed by the fact that a Turkish actor is playing a role of a character who gets arrested). Severn and I chose this actor specifically because we wanted more global representation on stage. However, I have to admit that the particular role—that of someone who is (falsely) accused of a crime—might offer a challenging trope of its own: the "immigrant" who is considered a criminal. This was NOT something I had considered at all.

In terms of Heath, who was playing Margaret, I was just so excited to have the character of the employee/maid of sorts, who speaks several languages, thus showing up the wealthy employers and guests. She has more wisdom, street smarts and languages at her ready disposal than her employers. Still.

Heath and Richard brought up an important point: that the use of another culture and language is, or rather, should be, up for discussion in the moment with those involved, rather than a choice of the director alone. This makes sense, of course. I had forgotten to ASK. I had assumed it would be welcomed. Letting go of assumptions is key. Conversation is key. Once again this is clearly the only way forward: transparency for all. I am so grateful for this

conversation. I am so grateful that we have a rehearsal hall—and that I am *guiding* a rehearsal—wherein these conversations become part of the essential fabric of the process. It was a good day.

Thursday, June 20th

A final run-through in the hall. My goal over the past few days was to be able to do this. It is essential for all—for the actors, for me, for the designers, for the Artistic Director Brendan Healy. It made very clear the work ahead. The first portion of the play—the scenes that we have worked on with more specificity—came to strong life. Other scenes were unfocused and a mess—still in process of finding themselves. I wish that we were further along. And yet, to expect that with three rehearsals a week (the secondary rehearsals for both shows were few) is a bit of crazy on my part. Yes, there are scenes that have barely been looked at. This is frustrating for the actors and a couple of them let me know it. The biggest challenge has been the fact that I have been asked NOT to work scenes but rather *run* them. Then the request will be to work scenes *rather* than run them. A compromise is essential. I wish this were not so. And I wish there were more time. Still, I do need to look at: a) my use of time in the hall and b) my leadership around the ways in which I want to work on a given day. I have always felt quite strongly and clear about this on other productions. Why does this prove so challenging in this regard this time? The schedule? The time? The rehearsal hall itself—which I can find challenging as the set-up has me right on top of the actors all the time? The various personalities? Shakespeare? My own navigation through all of the above? Still, even though there was messiness and a whole lot of less-than-stellar staging on my part, there was also much goodness and some real clarity both in terms of the playing AND uncovering of the work ahead. I was ultimately happy with what was discovered in this run and very pleased that despite its messiness, Brendan could see where it was heading—or hopes to head.

Saturday, June 22nd

First day in the park. It is so good to be here! The set is gorgeous and offers so many playing areas and levels. The challenges that I faced in the rehearsal hall—so very close to the actors, no levels—they disappear now that we are on-deck.

I feel like I am now in my element. There is ease. There is a greater sense of trust from the actors as well—as they SEE and FEEL that I am in my element. I had told them a few days ago that once we are in the park, sections of staging and entrances and exits will change. This is already proving to be the case. The staging, now that we are on the deck, becomes clear. The actors' physical and emotional storytelling are informing each other well. It is a relief. A good day! We have much to do over the next few rehearsals, including cleaning up the Macarena dance, and digging more deeply into scenes that have not had the time they deserve.

Thursday, June 27th

The actors today were slow and lacking energy. I suggested an Italian of the final scene. Few did it. This was shocking to me. I asked what was going on. Those that didn't do it said that a) they want to work the scene and not Italian it and b) why do an "exercise" now rather than work the scene itself? It was so surprising to me that they would think that this was all we would do—as though an Italian was my idea of "working a scene." Really? Could they not feel the lack of energy in the first run of it? "Working" would be impossible until they were energized. In fact, just speeding up and letting go *did* allow for some real playing in moments. I see now though, that I should have said, "Hey, there's not a lot of energy here, let's do an Italian to get things moving and THEN we will work on the scene." Offer this info prior! Got it.

Monday, July 1st

A discussion with Brendan Healy has made it clear: more cuts are needed. The first round cut a good fifteen minutes from our running time in the rehearsal hall. It is not only challenging to cut scenes vis-a-vis clarity of storytelling, but it is also heart-breaking. Language disappears. In a play that uses language as its weaponry and seduction, the loss of ideas, phrases, scenes, and confrontations all feel like chipping away at one's heart. Of course, it must be done.

What happens to the storyline when a key scene is axed? In this case, the party scene loses its edge: the audience no longer knows that Ursula and Leonato think that the Prince is going to propose to Hero. This belief added a huge and complex layer to the party and its revels. All were *en garde* for the night ahead. Now that this scene is axed, it becomes more benign and light-hearted. This feels a loss to me. However, what's the alternative?

Do I consider cutting the montage rather than cutting more Shakespeare? NO! The montage, all 49 seconds of it, tells a physical story of relationship and time passing. It is quite beautiful, though not entirely successful yet. It needs more refining and specificity, and it will be vibrant and fun non-verbal storytelling. It will offer the audience another way into these characters which is interesting. Am I being truer to Shakespeare and the spirit of the play and *this production's* telling of the story by including this montage? I think so. I hope so. I think so. I will have to continue to remind myself of this as we head into other cuts in the text.

Thursday, July 4th

The company looked at the ending I have created. Shit. It is a lesson in humility to offer a draft of one's fresh writing to a collective for dissection. Why I did it this way is hard to fathom. Expediency. This is the reason. We are at our final stages of rehearsal. The choice was also derived out of a desire for continued communal ownership of this production. Or is it that I am

just, at this point in the process, fearful of saying, "Hey, this is what we are going to say and do. THIS is the new material". The fact that Rose's writing and collaboration are an intrinsic aspect of the production is one of the reasons I hold back from this. Still, it is *my* envisioning of the production. Regardless, it is a challenge and really hard on one's fragile artistic ego and art to have it read *poorly* in the first go-round because the artist does not like it. So, it does not stand a chance! After much conversation, though, a portion of it remains—a portion that I wrote and created in collaboration with Rose. I know, though, that overnight I will no doubt have further ideas to add to this one. I will offer an addition tomorrow when heads have cleared and all have not been under the hot sun for several hours. The idea is to have Hero, in just a couple of words, offer the grey area: the possibility that she may not get married and not spend her life with Claudio. This is imperative. The supposed happy ending/double wedding is questionable. My inclusion of the construct created for the beginning—i.e. the stand-up—provides an opportunity to give voice to a woman—Hero—who is fully silenced in the original text. I like this idea very much. Selling it to the company will be my job.

Friday, July 5th

As per above: sold! First preview. It was so very heartening. It is clear we have a show to offer. It is important that the cast knows this. It is important that I know this! Rose's connection with the audience felt magical and drew viewers into the story. She was concerned about the pre-show wander, connecting with the audience, asking them about their relationships, writing down information—she was worried it would throw off her opening stand-up. I am very glad we took the time to discuss her concerns. It allowed her to take the next fearless step and she did so with such aplomb. Most importantly, she discovered the joy in this intimate connection with the audience and the way in which it forwards her playing. The most marvellous event happened: a

group of young girls who were sitting on the grass up front got up and danced the Macarena with the cast at the end. The cast invited them on to the stage to join in the bow. If I could bottle this moment and sprinkle it at every performance, I would. It encapsulated so much of what I hope for in theatre in general and for this production in particular. It is the stuff of theatrical dreams.

Friday, July 12th—Opening Night

The hill was packed! It was a wonderful opening; certainly the best run yet. I was pleased for all. The actors were alive and playing fully with each other and the audience was with them every moment. Audience and actor: a gorgeous symbiotic relationship—one that vibrates on the hill in High Park in ways that are unlike any other venue I've experienced in Toronto. Everyone is PRESENT. Afterwards, Heath V. Salazar, new to performing in Shakespeare in High Park, was grinning ear-to-ear as they spoke of this extraordinary relationship. It really is a gift for actor and audience alike. Or, CAN be. This is the hope.

The afternoon's rehearsal was our final one—it was very hot and the actors were understandably tired. I wanted to support them through this day while also touching lightly on a few sections and making sure they had a line run. All went well. It was a joyful line run. At the end of it, I offered some parting words, wondering if they were listening. It was late afternoon. We were sitting outside, folks needed to eat, take a swim, and chill (in the heat). I can appreciate their distraction. Still, I am used to offering final pre-opening thoughts to a company I've directed and them being all-ears. Or at least, appearing to be! Most here seemed to be. It was heartening to see Rose nod her head in agreement at my suggestion that they continue to play on the "razor" line of winning and losing at every moment. With comedy it is so easy to fall into the pattern of *playing comedy* rather than playing *on the razor.* I also requested that they ask a question for each show: What is war? What is love? What is this place? Who is Conrad? What is

marriage? What is the landscape? I firmly believe that entering a performance with a question is the way in which to keep a show alive and true. There is still so much to investigate and learn. When the artist/actor stops asking questions, the art starts to feel somewhat fixed and soon—stale. Consciously asking a question and pursuing an investigation are key to the creation of vibrant theatre for me. However, I have no doubt that some of the actors will not pursue this. It is out of their comfort zone or interest.

The opening: I have a couple of notes. Of course! I will pass them along to stage management. But it is also time to let go. I look forward to seeing the show again in a few weeks from now. And of course, I will be an avid reader of the show reports. It is hard to let go! I am glad that I have planned a getaway—a holiday—up in the Muskokas. Ha!

CHAPTER THREE: EPILOGUE

Reflecting on a production is such a multi-layered endeavor. This thesis production of *Much Ado About Nothing* has given me *much* upon which to reflect. The pun is apt. This epilogue highlights some of what went well through the process, some of the challenges I encountered, and what I might do differently next time.

I am ultimately proud of the work and pleased with what the company and I accomplished together. The audience's response has been tremendous. At the performances I attended, I was surrounded by hundreds of people who appeared to be fully engaged in the rollercoaster ride of the play's journey. The show reports provided by Laura Baxter, our Stage Manager, offer the same information. I did not shy away from the challenging cruelty in the play that creates said rollercoaster ride. The humour, the romance and the brutality in the play were each investigated and presented. They were interwoven into the fabric of the storytelling. I also discovered, as I described in the Director Journal Excerpts, the joys of leaning into the challenges of the language itself in order to uncover its truth and meaning both for the actor and the audience.

A goal was to create a production specifically for High Park and its audiences. The collaboration with set designer Joanna Yu provided a vision of the Muskoka world, which nestled beautifully into the High Park landscape. Joanna's design offered multiple levels and playing areas. I feel these were well incorporated into the storytelling. The nature and amount of the audience's participation worked well and forwarded the action of the play. The conceit of setting the story in the late 1990's worked well on the whole. The 1998/99 references in Rose Napoli's first stand-up set the time and place for the audience. The use of props, the choice of

music, and most especially, the outfits created by costume designer Anna Treusch all supported the twenty-year-old time frame in the ways in which I had hoped they would.

While the production offered more traditional hetero-normative couplings, the feminist lens was present throughout. I had made a point through the rehearsal process with the actors to have the men engage fully in behaviour informed by a patriarchal, privileged society, while at the same time, making sure that the women noted and responded to the behavior around them in real time within the action of the play. This was not always easy. The cast included a group of fine men who are "woke," a number of whom initially balked at playing into the misogyny in the text. Shifting this negative definition of misogyny into the more positive interpretation of the ultimate beauty of "brotherhood" allowed the actors to play fully and passionately. There was one incident in rehearsal wherein the actor playing Claudio, Emilio Vieira, balked at the staging of a moment at the end of the play that he felt would be particularly rude to Hero. In time (and with a full explanation to Emilio), our offering this seemingly "rude" moment in fact allowed the audience to witness Hero's response to his behavior, thus making for a richer, more complex and truthful moment.

The rehearsal process, especially the first several weeks of it, were ripe with investigations of the language and character. I did not worry about blocking the actors in these early rehearsals. The examination of the internal engines of the scenes was the focus. The exercises, games, physical explorations, and pursuit of the specific use of the language all forwarded both the mining of the characters' intentions and a robust playing of scenes.

For the actors playing the soldiers, I had wanted a physical ease and playfulness between them, informed by their lives in the army. Early in the process, we spent a morning doing improvisation and physical work intended to familiarize themselves with each other's body

weight. The pay-off for this was not only a bonding between the actors, but also encouraged a kind of physical intimacy, camaraderie and mock-fighting as a part of the characters' communication with each other. This was something I had been interested in exploring: the soldiers' relationship with each other through their bodies in conjunction with their language.

A great desire of mine was to release assumptions about how a given scene "should" be played and to uncover the truth of the moment. While I would suggest that this is said of any rehearsal process I helm, I learned that when working with Shakespeare, the "shoulds" could bump up exponentially. A highlight of uncovering new paths and intentions in moments occurred the first time Emma Ferreira, who played Hero, powerfully made it clear to her Claudio, in no uncertain terms, that she had been defiled by him. The character herself became a vibrant and strong reflection of her name: Hero. Few of us in the room had ever heard this moment played with this fervent intention before (in other productions). Emma's choice here offered a prime example of letting go of textual presumptions. Anytime an actor suggested that an idea of mine was perhaps "not in the text," Emma's discovery became proof that Shakespeare's words offered myriad surprising interpretations for all, including me.

I come now to the dominant choice and invention for this production: Beatrice's use of stand-up. I wanted it to draw the audience into the world of the play and highlight the play's themes of comedy, love, marriage, failure, discovery, and empowerment. This worked very well on the whole. The collaboration between Rose and me, in conjunction with Rose's stunning work and playing of the role, ultimately offered an intrinsic link between the audience and the storytelling. The audience was invited along on Beatrice's journey, a journey that included many players and events. My choice to have Beatrice chat with the audience prior to the show in order to garner ideas for her stand-up created the immediacy I had hoped for. Everyone on the hill

suddenly seemed to become more deeply and viscerally connected to the story that night. Having Beatrice as the entrance into the world of the play—and its exit—also meant that a strong female voice and lens were present throughout. Rose was nervous about talking to the audience before the show. She feared it might throw her off her game for the production. I feared that this essential and beloved idea of mine would go by the wayside. A conversation we shared before the first preview is amongst the finest ones I've had as a director. We spoke together about fear of failure and how this hinders our art and our lives. Our words together led to heartfelt, personal manifestos about what theatre is and can be; about the joys of the unknown and how the risk of failure is ever-present and to be celebrated, is thrilling, is human. It creates vibrant art. I also reminded her of her extraordinary technique and power as an actor which would support her journey. I asked her, "What is the worst thing that can happen? What can be learned?" These are questions I ask *myself* with rigour. Rose and I bonded in this moment. It resulted in her stepping into her discomfort and testing the waters. She discovered how this connection with the audience grounded and empowered her performance. I discovered how it energized the action of the play and the audience's complicity in the events of the story. Most importantly it re-affirmed my belief in the power of a) honest communication and b) daring to lean into the fear of failure.

With regards to overall audience participation, I was grateful for the suggestions of Directing Mentor Peter Hinton and Artistic Director Brendan Healy, who both had questions about the ways in which Nora McLellan, as Dogberry, engaged with those sitting on the hill. Nora is a master at this. She is hysterically funny and present, and knows how to take care of audience members who participate. However, during the first previews the extended participation, while enjoyable, stopped the action of the play. Why was Dogberry there at all? Who *was* Dogberry? Healey and Hinton's questions and comments led me to calibrate the extent

of the Park Ranger's conversations with the audience so that the story continued to go forward. As well, Hinton's suggestion that Dogberry needed to be introduced earlier in the play was a good one. Having Nora/Dogberry greet the soldiers as they arrived at the beginning and offer them safe passage as it were, familiarized the audience with this character, providing greater clarity for when she made her re-appearance later on in the play.

A thrilling discovery was the ways in which Shakespeare's text itself could become stand-up material, not only for Beatrice's character but also Benedick's. His use of Beatrice's microphone during a couple of key monologues provided simultaneous layers of storytelling: the man usurping the woman's art and practice in order to "win", but then also the man discovering its challenges as well as his admiration for the practice.

I was especially pleased about the ways in which the modern vernacular glided into the classical text. The transitions between the moments of stand-up and the actual scenes were as smooth as I had hoped they would be as were some of the "ad-libs" spoken by some of the characters during specific moments.

The final goal I will touch on was the editing of the text for the production. This was accomplished quite well overall. As noted in my Director's Journal Excerpts, added cuts were needed through the final days of the process. This was challenging and at times heart-breaking. It is hard to lose such glorious words and the specific actions and details of the play the words advance. The cuts that were implemented forwarded the story while still allowing room for the stand-up, as well as some moments of nuance and breath. This was a huge challenge, one that ultimately proved to be a good collaboration between the actors and me during the final rehearsals and previews. Seeking their help with this during those final days resulted in their greater ownership of the text and the production.

There are ideas and roads that were less traveled in this production than I had initially hoped. I had been intrigued by the research I uncovered about women in the military in the late 90's and the horrific sexual and verbal harassment they had experienced. For me, this explained why a woman, Don John, might forward the plots that she does. She has been abused and damaged. This created a great backstory, but how to make it apparent in our storytelling was a question I had not answered fully enough for myself. I also struggled getting the actor playing Don John to go deeper into an exploration of her damage and how this might manifest in the playing. As well, my prep should have included more details to support this idea in terms of costume and props, and most especially in terms of the ways in which the characters related to her. Fortunately, a very strong actor played the role and this helped to overcome some of my own lack of directorial specificity. The fact that she is a woman of colour also created a character for an audience that was marginalized not only in a man's world, but also most especially in a white man's world: the character's half-brother, Don Peter, was played by a white actor, as was the role of Claudio. This fact aided in offering context to the story of the outsider who is a "muzzled" woman, as Don John describes herself, despite my lack of providing greater specificity about a woman in the military.

Another lack of stronger specificity on my part involved Don Peter; this affected some of the detailing of this enigmatic character. In future I would need to be clearer about his specific position in the military. My waffling between his being a CEO and also having unspecified experience as a soldier gave this character and the actor playing him less clarity. Another important line of inquiry about Don Peter was not fully developed. I believe that one of the key motivating factors for Don Peter's actions in the play is his love for Claudio. When I explored this aspect of the character in a studio production at York University, a young gay man played

the role. He was able to access with ease his private desire for Claudio while simultaneously covering it up out of a need to stay closeted to the world. For me, this is an obvious and highly interesting motivating factor for the role. I was surprised at the questioning of this idea in the rehearsal hall. There seemed to be little buy-in from the group. Private conversation with the actor showed he understood the idea and yet, as an older, straight actor he had much farther to go to understand how this choice might be manifested in performance. Still, it was my inability to address this nuance properly in our rehearsals that kept this kind of homosexual longing very far under wraps in the scenes. I moved on. Why did I let this go? Probably because of time and a desire to keep things moving.

As we headed into Week Three or Four, our secondary rehearsals became minimal to non-existent. This proved harder for me to use the time as effectively as I would have hoped. I learned quickly that more time and/or a better use of it is necessary when directing classical text in a repertory rehearsal process, most especially when working with an abridged version that includes a layer of newly written and created material that requires exploration in rehearsal. I am not adept at entering the room with all the answers. For me the joy is in the investigation and the discoveries. In this context, however, arriving with more certainty in some areas and perhaps being less collaborative in others might have proven more productive at times. These words are in many ways antithetical to my own beliefs about the nature of rehearsal and process, but it is useful advice when working within these specific parameters.

It became clear early on that the process and my work during it would have benefitted greatly by having an assistant who would be present for the full process. This ended up not being the case. I am generally someone who looks to her assistant as a sounding board for ideas, for doing research, and also for taking on portions of the rehearsal, allowing me to focus on other

specific areas or scenes that demanded more time. I discovered that this becomes of greater importance when one is working in a repertory schedule that has primary rehearsals and a limited number of secondary rehearsals. One becomes aware of how much there is to do in a highly-limited time frame. The presence of an assistant was greatly missed.

Overall I would say that the navigation of the various personalities and their needs, behaviors and separate creative journeys vis-a-vis acting Shakespeare offered some of my greatest challenges, strongest accomplishments and learning curves. I have worked with strong personalities in my directing career. It always demands energy, focus, strong listening, and clarity. The combination of the personalities in this particular cast, their various practices, the demands of directing Shakespeare for the first time, the fact that new material was being created and interwoven into the text, and the exigencies of the repertory rehearsal schedule itself, I found overwhelming at times. My listening, clarity of thought and specificity of direction were affected. This resulted in some less buoyant, less informative and less creative rehearsals. It also had me choosing to step away from some directorial choices that received push-back. Dialogue, including disagreement between director and actor, usually energizes and inspires. However, I found myself occasionally feeling worn out by the challenges to ideas and direction I was offering (most of which were eventually investigated and realized in the production).

I also found myself on the receiving end of some serious mansplaining and other behavior that I cannot imagine occurring had I been a male director—or perhaps a more renowned director. Delineating the specifics is unnecessary. Instead, I will look at my own responses to the incidents and the opportunity of learning they have provided. Had I responded with forceful clarity and strength—had I gone "alpha" as it were, immediately upon the first occurrence—perhaps this would have nipped this behaviour in the bud. I did not do this. Rather,

I just thickened my skin and moved forward. This tactic was useful in terms of keeping a rehearsal alive and productive. It has its personal costs, however. On the plus side, the thickening of one's skin as a director is beneficial and I was pleased to have stayed focused and continued on with forwarding good work from all. But a lesson has been learned.

Returning to the play itself, in a future production I would add one or two more stand-up moments. I want the audience to witness Beatrice's struggle with her stand-up as her armour slips away. We see a character's failure to hold on to her past "norm" as she opens her heart. It is deeply funny and deeply true. I envision this leading to perhaps a darker and harder use of stand-up in the show as the cruelty in the play became more apparent. I am curious to see what might emerge. As well, I would strengthen my dramaturgy around the use of the information garnered from the audience during the pre-show. It could have been more fully interwoven into the storytelling.

In this play about love and the dismantling of lies informed by belief systems that require dismantling, another area I had hoped to explore were relationships that were less hetero-normative. Ursula and Margaret might hook up at the end. The two older, single, unmarried men, Leonato and Don Peter, could look toward each other and a potential future together. These ideas demand time and focus early on and throughout rehearsal. This did not happen this time around. Next time!

I will conclude with two reasons to cheer. Firstly, a goal for any production of mine is to create a company that will trust and support each other and play fully and fearlessly together. By opening night, all signs showed that this was accomplished. Despite assorted challenges, we had a rehearsal hall where successes, failures, transparency, argument, discussion, rigour, laughter, and investigation prevailed. Secondly and finally, I come to "happy endings," and the complexity

of grey areas and…dancing. Through the celebratory dance at the end of the play, questions remain. Given all that has come before I wondered if the High Park audience of today could actually celebrate the marriage of Claudio and Hero. How does Hero truly feel about this marriage? Will she marry him? What will this marriage hold? How will Beatrice and Benedick fare? Is this a true partnership? What happens to Don John? What has Leonato learned? What is Don Peter's private response to Benedick's "Get thee a wife!" (5.4.121)? How have all the various characters transformed by the end of the play? Have they transformed? I am not especially interested in the answers to these questions, but rather, I yearned for an audience to be stimulated—to ponder, discuss and perhaps argue about these questions as they wandered out of the park and back on to the street. Creating a production with the company of actors, designers, stage managers, and crew that offered less circumscribed definitions of a "happy ending" was a goal.

Hopefully, for an audience today, a happy ending would be one that shares joy, love and laughter while also embracing uncertainty, inquiry, and a sense of community. In our present world, offering shared questions along with shared laughter is appropriate. So are tears. So is dancing. A great hope of mine was that in the show's final moments, members of the audience might join the actors and boogie on the hill. This was realized at several performances. How sweet is that on a summer's eve in these complicated times?

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